

**Statement by C. Gregg Petersmeyer**  
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Concerning "Authorizing the President's Vision:  
Making Permanent The Faith-Based and Community Initiative"  
H.R. 1054: The Tools for Community Initiatives Act

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**Introduction**

My name is Gregg Petersmeyer. I am the Vice Chair of America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth. I served for four years on the first President Bush's senior White House staff. I was an Assistant to the President and founding Director of the first White House Office of National Service, better known then as the Points of Light Office. I was then a Visiting Scholar at Indiana University's Center on Philanthropy where I conducted research on what might be called the common journey of social entrepreneurs, individuals who start their own community-based initiatives. In 1996 I was asked to be the lead architect of the Presidents' Summit for America's Future held in Philadelphia in 1997, an historic gathering of Presidents Clinton, Bush, Carter, and Ford and Mrs. Reagan representing President Reagan as well as other leaders and community delegations from across the nation. The Presidents and others convened because of their belief that children and youth must be among our urgent national priorities and they committed the nation to a Five Promises framework of essential resources every young person needs to succeed and become an engaged citizen. General Colin Powell chaired the Presidents' Summit and then its follow-on organization, America's Promise, which with him I helped found and develop.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to responding to your questions but first I would like to offer a brief opening statement framing two issues that I believe are relevant to your consideration of a permanent White House office providing presidential support to community initiative.

- First, with respect to Presidential leadership in this area, I believe it is useful to think of the President more in his or her role as national leader than as federal leader, by that I mean primarily as leader of the nation rather than as chief executive of the federal government.
- Second, if the current president and his two immediate predecessors are guides, it is safe to say that future presidents will bring their own perspectives to this work. However, I believe we can frame useful principles that might govern a permanent White House office focused on community initiative.

## The President as National Leader

When I came to Washington to join the White House staff in January 1989, I held several fundamental beliefs that I suspect most other Americans would have held if they had moved into the White House to do the job I was asked to do.

- One fundamental belief was that America is a nation of communities and if America is to be a great nation it has no choice but to be a nation of great communities.
- A second belief was that within the tens of thousands of communities that make up America, very serious challenges exist. These include challenges in communities where parents desperately need greater help in preparing their children to be responsible and successful adults; challenges in communities where physical safety to live, raise families, work, play and worship is a problem; and challenges in communities where many individuals struggle with addictions of one kind or another or struggle to overcome some other grave personal challenge and need the help of others to change their lives and in turn the lives of their families for the better. In other words very serious challenges exist in every community.
- A third belief with which I came to Washington was that our ability or inability to meet these kinds of challenges as a people living in communities with one another says more about what kind of nation we are and more about the quality of the American civilization than what kind of government we have. And I came to Washington believing that while the ability to overcome these challenges far exceeds the capacity of government alone and even government in combination with market forces, it does not exceed our *national capacity*. By national capacity I mean the potential energy and talent of millions upon millions of Americans of all ages acting purposefully both as individuals and as leaders and members of organizations in every community across America.

By January 1989, at the time of his inauguration, I had known the President for almost twenty years and had every reason to believe that he shared these basic beliefs. Moreover, when I was sworn in as a member of his senior staff when he was inaugurated, he became the first President in American history to establish a White House office to strengthening the President's leadership of the civic engagement of Americans in the nation's problem solving and to commission an assistant to lead that work. In fact, these were the only two structural changes that the new President made in the organization of his White House staff.

What then was the objective of this new office and my work as an assistant to the President? The objective was to increase the volume and effectiveness of the work of citizens in helping to solve serious social problems in the tens of thousands of communities that exist across America. What kind of work am I referring to? The variety of examples is almost endless and includes individuals mentoring one another; tutoring in reading, English, math or science; caring for foster children; helping individuals stay sober or remain free of some other addiction; coaching young people in after school sports; developing internships in businesses; renovating or building homes for low income families; providing meals or companionship to shut-in senior citizens; or providing hospice care to the terminally ill.

These are not acts of random value. They are in fact exactly the kinds of indispensable ingredients that create positive environments in which children and young people can thrive and that underpin parts of the strategic framework of the Presidents' Summit on America's Future and America's Promise. Similarly, they are essential ingredients to making a community whole and good for all of its members regardless of their ages.

The main point is that former President Bush's work in this area was focused on the capacity of individuals and organizations across the nation to create and advance their own community-based solutions rather than to be focused as President on the capacity of the federal government to create programs to assist communities. This is what I mean by the President acting more in his capacity as the leader of the nation rather than as leader of the federal government.

Therefore the actual strategy of the first Bush White House was a classic strategy of a movement. The focus was the public beyond Washington, not office holders within the federal government. The strategy had five parts:

1. **Changing attitudes** in ways that would call every American to engage in helping to solve our most critical social problems and that would convince all Americans that a life which includes serving others is meaningful, adventurous and successful.
2. **Identifying what works** and bring that news to places everywhere.
3. **Discovering, encouraging and developing leaders** from all walks of life who could lead by example and lead others forward.
4. **Reducing volunteer liability** so that that one of the key fears of engaging in voluntary activities would not have a deterrent effect on people acting on the call they heard to help others.
5. **Building supporting infrastructure** within every community to link people who care and their institutions to people in need.

To carry out this strategy, new or reformed institutions were necessary. As you can see from Exhibit A, we created four institutions during that four year period: the White House Office of National Service in 1989; the Points of Light Foundation in 1990; the Commission on National and Community Service in 1991; and the National Center for Community Risk Management & Insurance in 1992. The four institutions were unified by a common vision but had individual missions and distinct strategies and programs that together worked to achieve that shared vision.

But the main point was not the institutional arrangements but rather the belief that everyone has a gift to give that can make a real difference in their community. That was why the metaphor of a "Point of Light" was so important. It was about calling everyone to think differently about themselves and one another first, about making room for people to step forward, about leading one another by example, about recognizing that every problem is being solved somewhere, about honoring people in the application of their personal gifts for the benefit of others. This was the strategy because it is the only way to really build the volume of people helping, to discovering and releasing the human energy required to actually solve some of the most pressing challenges facing tens of thousands of communities. At the very time when there was ever increasing focus on credentialism and the need for more professionals, ours was a strategy that called for far more *amateurs* to step forward and help. There is simply no other way for us as a nation to reach the volume of community engagement that is necessary to overcome our challenges.

Here I want to make the important point that I believe that culture more than politics influences behavior. Therefore, in the very early days of former President Bush's presidency, I drafted for him a sentence that by President Bush's own admission he publicly stated more than any other during his presidency, namely this: "From now on in America, any definition of a successful life must include serving others."

As you may remember, to give concrete meaning to that statement and to deliberately define the term "point of light" on an ongoing basis, each day from the White House a "public storytelling" occurred in the form of public recognition by the President. Between November, 1989 and January, 1993 a total of 1,020 individuals or groups were formally recognized as a "Daily Point of Light" from the White House and were thanked by the President on behalf of the nation. The storytelling also helped advance the related and very important strategic notion that every problem is being solved somewhere in America. Far from preaching to people about what they should do, which of course nobody likes or responds well to, this tactic sought to influence by example. It was not about talking down to people but about everyday Americans revealing to one another what is possible by the evidence of their own example. This relentless storytelling was the first daily recognition program by a President in American history. It was deliberately the most public part of the President's work and a key tactic in the larger strategy that included the significant institutional change that is described on Exhibit A.

### **Principles to Consider in Looking Forward**

Looking forward, let me say a word about useful principles that might govern a permanent White House office from my perspective given that if the current president and his two immediate predecessors are any guides, I think it is safe to assume that future presidents will bring their own perspectives to this work.

- First, rather than focusing on the different strategies for making a difference which one can argue has been a distinction among the last three presidents, I believe it would be useful at this stage to focus on the outcomes – the thriving indicators if you will – that we all seek for the maximum number of children, adults and families in every community in America.
- Second, I would argue that if we were honest about the enormity of the challenges that communities across the country face in achieving these kinds of outcomes, most Americans would look favorably on each of the building blocks that the last three presidents and Congress have put in place over the last 16 years. The fact is most Americans know that their own communities have a number of big mountains to climb and that for their communities to climb those mountains they need many different paths – the path of faith-based work, the path of government supported service, the path of voluntary action. They also believe that each path needs to be crowded with Americans of every age contributing as best they can to the vital work of their community.
- To be more specific, I believe a permanent White House office should reflect the fact that the vast majority of Americans support the best contributions of each of the last three Presidents of the United States and the Congress in this area. They support the work of

former President Bush as he encouraged broad based voluntary civic engagement and created several new institutions to help achieve that objective. They support adding to the work of volunteers the work of other American citizens who as a result of a stipend are able to provide direct service to meet unmet education, human service, public safety and environmental needs. They support the efforts of Congress in encouraging the authority and ownership of this federally funded work to increasingly reside where local private nonprofit agencies determine the work of the corps members and corps members leverage the participation of volunteers. And they support eliminating improper federal barriers so as to allow faith-based entities to compete for federal funding to the fullest opportunity permitted by law.

- But most import of all in considering a permanent White House office, I would argue that the President has two important domestic roles to help the nation achieve key objectives. One role is to be the chief executive of the federal government. The other is to be the leader of the nation. The establishment of this office would help the President fulfill this second role.
- Finally, the President as leader of the nation involves the power of culture in affecting the behavior of individuals in every community. Here every President can and should play the indispensable role of helping the culture define one of the most powerful ideas there is, namely what it means to live a successful life. It will always be all the more powerful if that definition is framed by the President to include serving others and if the President calls relentlessly all people wherever they live to serve others to the best of their ability.

I would close by offering a final comment. At a time of deep partisanship in this city with no change in site, we are discussing today a dimension of American life that could hold the greatest promise for bringing us together. I know that the American people who live in the tens of thousands of communities of this country believe we can all do much better as a nation and as a people in working together in our communities.

I look forward to responding to your questions. Thank you.